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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 00063

SIPDIS

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TGS: PHUM, SNAR, PGOV, ECON, UN, AF, AJ, IR
SUBJECT: IRAN: CHILD MALNUTRITION, DRUG USE, DRUG LABS
AFFLICT URBAN POOR

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E. AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Counselor Rob Garverick, Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

Summary

1. (C) Baku Iran Watcher met with a two Iranian NGO leaders who focus on children's rights and drug addiction problems in poor areas on Tehran and other cities. Among other activities the NGO operates child-feeding programs that support approximately 4,000 families. The pair work in some of the poorest urban neighborhoods in Tehran, and have first-hand insights into recent social, economic, and political conditions in these urban areas.

2. (C) The pre-eminent problems they cited included rising child malnutrition and drug addiction (both allegedly becoming more prevalent in urban vice rural areas); poor living conditions and lack of access to schooling for "many thousands" of Afghan refugee children, as well as many poor Iranian children; and the existence of a de facto narco-culture in many poor urban areas, in which "warrens" of under- and above-ground drug laboratories amount to a cottage industry. In some urban areas, they claimed, hard drugs are both easier to get and cheaper than bread. While much of this information coincides with previously reported allegations and anecdotal evidence, this is the first time Iran watcher has had access to knowledgeable eyewitness testimony concerning these conditions. End Summary.

Iranian NGO Fights Child Malnutrition, Addiction

3. (C) Abbas and Maryam run a noted Tehran-based "children's rights" secular NGO offering assistance to needy children in the poorest parts of Tehran, and in the cities of Kermanshah, Shiraz, and Zabul (near the Afghan border). They met with Baku Iran watcher during a visit to Baku associated with an upcoming United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) conference in New York, which they will attend.

4. (C) Their main facility, "Iran House" (Khaneh Irani) in South Tehran, runs a feeding and educational support program for malnourished children (certified as such by the NGO's

medical committee). This is also the main function of their non-Tehran branches, the largest of which (in Zabul) feeds the children of 2,000 families a day. The couple said that funding and in-kind donations for this effort comes from private contributions, grants, food companies, and similar non-governmental sources. Many of their workers are volunteers from the faculties and student bodies of Iranian universities.

15. (C) Their Iran House NGO also combats child malnutrition and child drug addiction through public awareness media activities, publications (some of which they displayed), street campaigns, and outreach offices staffed by volunteers in South and East Tehran. It also runs educational tutoring and big brother/big sister programs for children of prisoners, child refugees, and others denied access to Iranian schools for economic or legal reasons. It has recently begun a program counseling female runaways (including abused women and child brides), working (due to political and social sensitivities) through a spin-off NGO separate from the Iran House facility.

16. (C) Iran House has been operating for more than twelve years, and Maryam claimed that the NGO enjoys guarded acceptance in poor neighborhood both from residents and the authorities, though relations with elements of both are sometimes tense. She noted that some of their activities were recently profiled on the Voice of America's Persian service. She added that UNESCO has invited her to Afghanistan to consult with Afghan NGOs on operating similar centers there.

Urban Child Malnutrition Increasing

17. (C) The couple said that child malnutrition is a growing problem in poor parts of large Iranian urban areas. Maryam asserted that large numbers of children in these areas are significantly underweight and unable to go to school because of parental abuse, physical weakness, and/or lack of funds. She cited food price inflation, unemployment, parental neglect (greatly exacerbated by widespread adult drug addiction), and lack of effective social infrastructure as among the underlying causes of this problem. She complained that neither the Iranian government nor international organization are focusing on this issue, the latter in part because (for bureaucratic or national pride reasons) the government resists suggestions that it seek assistance from or even consult with the World Food Program or similar organizations on this problem.

Official School Milk Program: Just a Corruption Cow

18. (C) Maryam noted that Iran lacks any effective state-supported "Head Start" - type educational or school feeding program for needy children. While a publicized state-run free milk program for needy schoolchildren exists on paper, Maryam claimed that this program is nonexistent in reality. "In ten years of work, I have never heard of a single child receiving free milk from this program," She said. She and her husband suggested that whatever funds are officially budgeted for the state program are either channeled elsewhere, or swallowed up by corruption. (Note: In a separate conversation, another Iranian reminisced that during the Shah's time every child got free milk and bread in school. "How far we have fallen," he said. End Note).

Malnutrition Trends: Rural Down, Urban Up?

19. (C) The couple added that Iranian child malnutrition is increasingly an urban, rather than a rural, problem. Among other factors they attributed this trend to effective rural health programs not extended to cities; superior rural social support systems and traditions; and lower incidence of rural as compared to urban heroin addiction. As a result, Maryam argued, child malnutrition has fallen in rural areas while worsening in urban neighborhoods.

¶10. (C) She added that, while rural drug addiction is also severe, the most utilized narcotic remains opium, which she compared favorably to heroin in terms of its affects on families and children: unlike heroin derivatives, she observed, "opium addiction doesn't usually keep people from working or acting as parents, and doesn't spread HIV and hepatitis." In contrast, she said, opium is rapidly disappearing as a drug of choice in urban areas.

School's Out for Many Afghan Kids

¶11. (C) The couple also discussed challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in Iran, asserting that many are unable to attend schools because they aren't eligible for free schooling, can't pay school fees, and don't gain credit for prior Afghan schooling. She said that many of these and other children and urban poor live in shanty towns made up of metal and cloth scraps and boxes; the less lucky live on the streets. She said that there are thousands of Afghan children, with and without parents, concentrated in Tehran and cities near the Afghan border, such as Zabul (where her NGO runs its largest child feeding and tutoring program).

Child Drug Addiction Increasing

¶12. (C) The couple also expressed concern at growing child drug addiction as a contributing factor to malnutrition, and as a destructive element in its own right. Maryam claimed that three million people in Tehran are hard (as opposed to recreational) drug users, or have one in their immediate family. She noted that this is not only a problem of poor families: "drugs are available on every block, and every

(junior high school and above) in Tehran has a drug supplier inside the school." She asserted that child use of heavy narcotics is particularly prevalent in poorer areas of East and South Tehran. She added that in the areas where her NGO works & sixty to seventy percent of all adult addicts use Iranian Crack (a heroin derivative), and use children to support their habit. Now children are also smoking it.⁸ She commented that serious users quickly become a burden to their families, often become unable to work or function productively, and frequently die from the corrosive direct or indirect effects of their habit within three years.

Narcotics "Easier to Buy Than Bread"

¶13. (C) The couple said that public use of narcotics by adults and children in South and East Tehran is increasingly a common sight, and showed as an example a daytime photo of two 12-ish looking boys openly smoking what appeared to be crack heroin on the side of a street. They also showed some posters and a magazine put out by their organization as part of its effort to raise public awareness of the social damage caused by drug addiction, and the need to combat its spread.

¶14. (C) Maryam claimed that narcotics prices are decreasing even while bread prices are going up. She asserted that in some areas "it's easier and cheaper to buy narcotics than bread." She claimed that the government is doing little to stem the tide of drug addiction among the poor, and may even regard it favorably as a useful, social dampening/control device. (Comment: We frequently hear this conspiratorial, paranoid-sounding allegation from Iranians, including some who consider themselves overall regime supporters. True or not, this charge appears to be widely believed. End Comment).

Underground Warrens of rug Laboratories

¶15. (C) The couple asserted that a warren of drug laboratories, some utilizing children, exists in and under houses "in the worst parts of Tehran." In some cases, they said, the laboratories are semi-mobile, and are moved from

house to house every few months. They related that production is expanding and that street prices for synthetic drugs have fallen steadily over the last few years, with one "hit" of crack heroin costing as little as 8,000 Riyals (a little more than 80 cents). According to Maryam, the price for the same amount was 20,000 Riyals just a few years ago.

¶16. (C) Though occasionally receiving assistance from sympathetic government and security officials, Maryam said that their NGO is often under pressure from the authorities due to their independent work on socially sensitive issues in the poorest areas of Tehran. The couple said that their activities are sometimes attacked by conservative mullahs, and they and their staff are often quizzed by the authorities. Maryam said that she frequently ripostes to government officials and clerics that "we are doing the work that others should be doing, but are not," and attributed the continued operation of her NGO to tacit acceptance of this fact by government and police. She added that the local police sometimes provide escorts for NGO staff visits to the most dangerous urban areas, a service she considered helpful and even essential.

Poverty, Drugs Trump Politics for Urban Poor

¶17. (C) The couple said that the economic situation in Tehran is "getting worse and worse," with the price of a kilo of rice now exceeding a laborer's daily wages (see ref a). Maryam opined that gasoline sanctions against Iran will substantially drive up food and other prices, significantly exacerbating poor people's problems. The couple criticized the Iranian government's ineffective social assistance policies, but stressed that they otherwise stay totally out of politics in the interest of protecting their NGO. Nonetheless, Abbas muttered, "our leaders our sick," and Maryam claimed that "many people (in South Tehran) are against the government." Nonetheless, she stressed, for most (Tehrani poor), politics is irrelevant: "they are not

'for' Ahmedinejad or Moussavi; they are for heroin," she said.

Hoping to Network with Foreign NGOs

¶18. (C) Maryam regretted what she depicted as the relative isolation of many Iranian NGOs like hers from regional and international counterparts, and an alleged lack of awareness or attention until recently to Iran's social problems from the UN and other international bodies. She explained that a main goal for herself and Abbas in attending the ECOSOC conference is to heighten this consciousness, and meet and begin the process of networking with international counterparts. Maryam added that one organization will not contact in the US. is the VOA, due to concern over given its recent appearance on an Iranian government citizen contact "blacklist."

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